In Ponce De Leon Land

E. A. Sherman, "Chaucer" of '96

A wilderness at the very back door of the oldest settlement in America, sounds like an anachronism, an impossibility in this age of progress and improvement. Nevertheless such a wilderness actually exists and promises to prove an economic blessing to the region instead of a misfortune.

In the heart of Ponce de Leon land, thirty miles south and thirty miles west of St. Augustine, Florida, is the northeastern corner of a government timber reservation, known officially as the Ocala National Forest. It lies in Marion and Lake counties, Florida, was first reserved by a proclamation issued November 24, 1908, by President Roosevelt, the great militant champion of conservation. It now embraces a net area of 158,731 acres of government land, over 98 percent of which is timbered. Its exterior boundaries also embrace a total of 93,449 acres of privately owned land, most of which will doubtless eventually be purchased by the Federal Government and permanently devoted to forestry.

The Government lands which were thus reserved for National Forest purposes were a part of the "public domain", specifically remnants of that part of our national territory originally purchased from Spain.

Naturally it seems strange that any land so near the first white settlement on the continent should for nearly four centuries lie idle and unclaimed. The reason is easily and readily found in the character of the soil and its unsuitability for agriculture. Locally the region has for generations been known as the "Great Scrub," taking its name from the timber cover which consists chiefly of Pinus clausa, or sand pine, locally known as "scrub" pine. The soil is almost pure white sand, siliceous in character. Quite similar soils have, with fertilization, been found fairly well adapted to different agricultural crops where the hardpan is not too far from the surface; but in the "Scrub" the hardpan is often buried 40 to 60 feet beneath the
surface. Into this burden of sand the heaviest rainfall instantly disappears and any fertilizer applied to the surface would be promptly leached away. Fortunately sand pine thrives upon such soil, and, although it has in the past been considered practically worthless, the experts of the Forest Service of the United States Department of Agriculture believe the time is near at hand when the wood which will be produced from this forest will be a potent factor in the economic life of Florida.

The individual sand pine is small compared with the more highly prized longleaf pine, but the tree grows rapidly and its wood is fairly strong, of even texture and easily worked. It is not driven out by fire but on areas subject to frequent burning it proves itself best fitted to survive. This is not due to any fire-resisting quality in either the wood or the tree but is the natural result of the effect of fire on the cones of the sand pine, the heat not entirely destroying them but merely liberating their seeds which promptly start a new forest to take the place of the one just destroyed.

Sand pine reaches a diameter of two feet under unusually favorable conditions; but ordinarily mature specimens range from 10 to 16 inches in diameter breast high. Logs of this size furnish excellent material for crates and box boards, needed in ever increasing quantities by citrus growers and market gardeners. But it is not believed that the usefulness of this region will be limited to producing material for fruit and vegetable containers. As compared with longleaf pine, sand pine contains relatively small quantities of pitch. This is an advantage as a source of pulp wood for the manufacture of paper. It is the belief of the Forest Service that from the Ocala Division of the Florida National Forest enough pulpwood can be produced to supply for all time to come two great paper mills, each turning out 100 tons of kraft paper daily. At the same time the larger logs will be used for crates and boxes. All this, of course, is as planned for the future. For the present the task is one of rebuilding a natural forest unit which has been decimated by fire and alienation.

For generations the "Scrub" has been a favored hunting ground for the sportsmen of the surrounding region. The dense
thicket of sand pine and its undergrowth make an ideal covert for deer and many kinds of game birds, including quail and wild turkey. At the same time the almost impenetrable cover makes hunting difficult. This has in the past presented to the local sportsmen an irresistible temptation to incendiarism. A fire started in the dense thicket when tinder-dry runs with the wind as though the forest had been dipped in oil. Fire-killed sand pine deteriorates and falls in a surprisingly short time. Within two years following a fire in the "Scrub" only an occasional blackened snag is found on the burned area as much as three or four feet high. At the same time the surface becomes a waving field of young sand pine and sprouts of various shrubs. Deer feeding in old burns of this kind fall helpless prey to the high-powered rifles of the hunters on the opening of the hunting season.

Apparently the only way this problem can be solved is by removing the temptation to burn. This could be done by making a game refuge of the federal lands and forbidding hunting thereon. The hunters would thereafter gain nothing by destroying the cover. Upon the other hand, the "Scrub" would make an ideal breeding ground from which the surrounding portions of the State would be stocked with game by natural drift as the birds and animals increase in number and seek additional food supplies outside the limits of the protected area.

Dotted here and there throughout the "Scrub" are numerous "islands." An "island" in this region is not a body of land surrounded by water, but instead is a body of land covered with longleaf pine and entirely surrounded by scrub. The presence of valuable stands of longleaf pine resulted in all of the "islands" passing to private ownership long before the creation of the National Forests. However, most of the virgin stands of timber have been destroyed either by logging or turpentining. The lands are now of little value and will doubtless be acquired by the Government in order to remove fire danger and administrative problems.

In fact, many foresters believe that the area of longleaf pine in the Ocala National Forest can be greatly extended by planting and fire protection. Some few small experiments made in
favorable sites in the "Scrub" are very promising. Doubtless where the overburden of sand is deepest only sand pine will prove successful. But it is quite possible that the sand pine now occupies much of the area not because either soil or climate is unsuited to longleaf pine, but because the necessary presence of the sand pine on the larger dunes has resulted in constant fires, which have given that species an advantage on surrounding lands. With fires placed under control, and with forest planting and management designed to favor the spread of longleaf pine, the area now occupied by Pinus clausa should in future years be steadily reduced, and the area occupied by longleaf pine correspondingly increased.

From the standpoint of accessibility, the location could not be more nearly ideal. Nature has already provided the forest with its major transportation system, it being almost encircled by two navigable streams, the St. Johns River and the Oklawaha River, the former on the east and the latter on the north and west.

Nor is the region devoid of attractions in other forms. The great sand burden, resting on a hardpan buried at great depth, makes it a country of wonderful springs. Truly this is the land of Ponce de Leon and "the very Spring," authentic beyond a doubt, is shown the visitor at many places. During the winter months a steamer loaded with excursionists makes regular trips up the Oklawaha River, passes slowly beneath streaming banners of Spanish moss festooned from great over-hanging cypress trees, and finally makes its way into the very birthspot of what is claimed to be the greatest spring of all. Here a mighty tributary of the Oklawaha springs abruptly from the earth in volume sufficient to float a battleship.

Of course the people of this region claim that this is the real Ponce de Leon "Fountain of Perpetual Youth." No other genuine without the name blown in the bottle. But there are so many of these "very" springs in Florida that the wary traveler becomes skeptical. Nevertheless, when he visits the birthplace of the Oklawaha he can well imagine the thrill that stimulated that credulous old conquistador when he first gazed into the depths of this mighty wonder of sweet waters. Eighty
feet of liquid opalescence, with many colored specimens of marine life, deep blue entrances to caverns which seem to extend back under mysterious ledges and downward into the very heart of the earth itself. Doubtless as he beheld it for the first time he felt the cares and burdens of many years slip from his shoulders to sink into the unknown depths below. If not actually a fountain of youth, surely it is a sight sufficiently beautiful and thrilling to knock old age for a row of goals. With such attractive surroundings and such a gem of beauty and historic interest this great Government Forest is certain to eventually take high rank among the many great attractions of the beautiful southeastern peninsula.